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Reflections on a reimagined future for consumer research

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ABSTRACT

This paper is born of the joy and pain of institutional life. It responds to recent work by Craig Thompson and is a response to an invitation to participate from the Editor of the JMM (Mark Tadajewski). It seeks to take seriously the role of consumer research and consumption within society. It seeks to tell 'better stories' about the past, present and what it sees as a reimagined future for consumer research. To do so, it revisits some of the canonical works of consumer research, such exemplary work it suggests are worthy of revisiting and critiquing if we are to chart a rejuvenated form of consumer research that takes seriously our contemporary predicament and is more critical and incisive in its intent. With renewed purpose it takes on board the insights around Bauman's notion of 'liquid times', offers a range of opportunities, possibilities and dangers around the conflicted consumer self and puts forward an ABC of critical consumer research, where notions of affect, breakdown, contradiction are taken seriously for their theoretical and practical insights.

KEYWORDS

Affect; breakdown; contradiction; self; hope/fear; reimagined

Introduction

The opportunity to comment upon both Craig Thompson's and Russell Belk's exemplary work is a welcome one as it allows me the space to refocus upon a number of ideas which are stimulated by their work. Here, I shall initially focus upon some reflections on Belk's classic work (1988) alongside thoughts stimulated by Craig's piece (Thompson, 2024) as central to both I believe is a notion of consumer ontology, which to me is about being-in-the-world but also about our current 'conjuncture' (Grossberg, 2019).

Stuff matters

As Craig starts: 'One explanation for this [Belk's] paper's canonical status is that it did, indeed, identify the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behaviour' – 'that we are what we have' (2024, p. 555). This is a powerful statement, and I can in some ways see why consumer research as a field demands such a 'fact' as it thereby creates a world in its own image, a world where stuff matters and where our job becomes the exaltation of buying. The notion that people care that much about stuff, or that stuff is so important to them perhaps needs rethinking. Stuff also leads to problems, and these can be experienced at an individual or family level as clutter, or perhaps as hoarding. So, in some ways whilst the notion of an extended self makes sense, and

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it pretty much sums up my whole life in terms of the significance of consumption to who I am. It's not the end of the story, perhaps it's only the beginning. Personally, sometimes I feel like I'm drowning in stuff, in the form of books, vinyl, Lego. I'm not alone in this thought that there is perhaps too much stuff in the world as stuff is paradoxical, it has unintended consequences in other words. I would probably want to counter with the fact that we are our social relationships or in a more mindful form we are 'psychic' energy. The ability to access stuff is not equally shared by all, so here Belk writing in 1988 tells us: 'Money also gives us the power to selectively acquire or reject purchasable objects, thereby more selectively shaping our extended selves' (p. 150). I prefer Abba's 'Money, Money, Money' and living in a world of economic privilege as a statement on the Money economy and the contradictions woven into contemporary capitalism.

Bauman also writing in 1988, when Belk's classic appeared, wrote on *Freedom* and spoke the following terms of our increasing reliance upon consumption: 'In the world of consumption, the possession of goods is only one of the stakes of the competition (between individuals). The fight is also about symbols, about differences and distinctions they signify' (1988, p. 57). Possessions also produce consequences and demands upon consumers, in this case, a demand for money and fight for survival. Admittedly, this is true for some people, but it's not true for all people. The Money economy is integral to consumption, without its consumption and the economic would grind to a halt. Or not, as there are ways to keep consumers buying, so in other words to not simply 'extend' but also 'over-extend' themselves. Credit and loan schemes speak to this consumer desire and our need for stuff. But if history has taught us anything, it is that the ability to pay and our willingness to pay are not shared by all, instead it speaks of class privilege and a taken-for-grantedness of the way others survive and suffer in a world of consumption. Such a world is not shared evenly; instead, notions of inequality and injustice must be brought to the table as they speak of differentiation and distinction. Belk's work is perfectly in tune with the logic of consumer culture, i.e. that you are what you buy/possess or desire (see Belk et al., 2003, p. 331 and p. 348). More the magic ingredient becomes that of choice which fuels and stimulates a need for money. This is perfect for Marketing and Consumer Research as it gives 'us' endless opportunity to keep reminding consumers that they 'need' stuff for what CCT termed our 'consumer identity projects' (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 87) and finding ways to keep reminding consumers that stuff matters. Possessions matter as they become pathways to status, achievement, and success. Such a cultural logic of consumption also fits in with the prescient and shifting demands of capitalism and is politically in tune with both Thatcherism and Reaganism of the 1980s. For, as the Iron Lady famously said: 'There is no such thing as society'. Capitalism is the unspoken dynamic at work here as it creates a world in which consumption becomes ever important and the 'individual sacrosanct'. Marketing and consumer research as disciplinary fields of knowledge fits like a glove with this world of commerce. Belk reminds us of this logic in the paper: 'Consumption is a central facet of contemporary life, but it has seldom been considered from this broader perspective. The construct of extended self offers some promise for cultivating such a broadened appreciation of the potential significance of consumer research' (1988, p. 160). He also suggests perhaps more problematically that: 'Our accumulation of possessions provides a sense of past and tells us who we are, where we have come from, and perhaps where we are going' (p. 160).

Such a reflection to me speaks of the need to take unintended consequences seriously something which other disciplines, like Sociology, do so rigorously. To me this speaks of why we might need to start with a sense of paradox (Fromm, 1957/1995) within consumer

research. What the world needs now, in a time of climate change, is perhaps less stuff, not more buying but less consumption, to break the chains that we feel to stuff. Possessions in other words have become problematic and troublesome in a world of planetary decline. In some senses, this may (for some) produce an existential doubt, a heretical questioning over how life is lived and our reliance on stuff as consumption brings in its wake a whole set of contradictions, individual, collective, commercial, and planetary. So perhaps one imagined future for consumer research is to imagine its demise (the reality we must all contend with), to move to a post-consumer world perhaps, where the assumed link between possessions and identity projects is not simply taken-for-granted and more likely to be problematised and contested not by the few but by the many.

'Border disputes'

This brings me neatly to Craig's piece (Thompson, 2024) which in the competitive landscape of academic work is likely to possess Impact. To speak about work reminds us that capitalism relies not only on our willingness to keep buying but also the necessity to keep working. The foregrounding of work is necessary to remind us of how work shapes our time and 'psychic energy'. The overwhelm of a world of consumption is matched by the overwhelm of a world of work is how I would conjure up our current predicament. Craig when mentioning 'border disputes' sums this needs to think beyond consumption itself with a turn to the ideas of Bauman:

According to Bauman (2000), when prevailing modes of economic production, and the technological systems that support them, become sufficiently integrated into the practices of everyday life, they are soon translated into ubiquitous cultural metaphors for making sense of the world at large (Thompson, 2024, p. 560).

Here, the unwieldy but necessary term that is taken from Bauman's work on 'Liquid Modernity' (2000) is introduced by Craig to capture our current conjuncture, that of 'praxiomorphism' to make the point that our 'understanding' but also our 'being' in the world which we inhabit is shaped by the 'know-how' of the day (see also Bauman, 1973/1999 'Culture as Praxis'¹).

Consumption thus exists within a larger orbit of constraints and obligations not simply choices but taken for granted assumptions which become common sense and difficult to contest. What we come to accept without question is the slow march of history, politics, and economics. To grasp how change happens though is not easy, it demands the perspective of hindsight, to look through the rear-view window to better capture how change happens and the road that we've been on for so long. But it also demands a recognition of how economics and politics shape our understanding. Social relationships do not exist in a vacuum, they are mediated increasingly by work, technology and consumption/marketing.

Craig draws upon Bauman's distinction between 'heavy' vs 'light' capitalism and the work of McGuigan (2014) to foreground how we have become 'free-agent neoliberal workers' (Thompson, 2024, p. 561). At this point, I would like to return to the work of Bauman through my own affective interpretation of his ideas (Hewer, 2022). This paper, like many of mine, has been omitted from recent JCR work as not deserving of a CCT mention or a read. I'm not alone here though as other papers have suffered a similar fate

of omission. Here then lies the opportunity then for my commentary to restate some of my initial reflections and impressions which have failed to leave a mark on consumer research because that's simply how the game works. History as we know is written by the victors, and the outsiders stay on the margins, unless a market opportunity is grasped, or a marketing historian (Tadajewski, 2023) or budding marketing sociologist starts to read their past, present and future against the grain.

My own paper was bookended by two psychic breakdowns, not easy to admit I know, but it is those institutionalised experiences which to me are facts of life for the so-called 'free' academic which shaped the final themes and tone of the text. In the paper, my core thesis is a notion of 'liquid modern darkness' an attempt to make the 'familiar' strange' (Bauman, 1988, p. 7) which I defined as such to capture the tragedy implicit in our current conjuncture:

I have employed the term "liquid modern darkness" to refer to the general state of powerlessness and hopelessness which is endemic and systemic within Liquid Modernity, in such a condition the lifeworld is threatened, negative thinking abounds and fears of the liquidation of the self becomes commonplace. Such a usage highlights the crucial link between Liquid Modernity and declining mental health. (Hewer, 2022, p. 298).

To move closer to a notion of the forms of tragedy (perhaps delusion) woven into consumption and production it's necessary to return to one of my all-time sociological favourites, Simmel's 'The Metropolis and the life of the spirit' (Simmel, 1903/1964; see also Boy, 2021 for a contemporary translation of the classic text). His argument is a simple one that the move to urban life has consequences sometimes problematic for some and unproblematic for others. So, for some living in the city, with its sights, distractions, opportunities, and achievements produces a 'blasé attitude' comes to the fore; for others 'the intensification of emotional life' has far fewer positive consequences and here 'psychic overwhelm' becomes the order of the day. Simmel starts the paper with this insight: 'The most deep-seated problems of modern life stem from the individual's aspiration to defend the autonomy and individuality of his or her existence against overpowering social forces, the historical heritage, the external culture, and the technique of life' (Boy, 2021, p. 192). Such a foregrounding of 'deepest problems' to me sounds necessary to capture the current moment (conjuncture) in which we are living. To do so, we must accept that the affective terrain of modern life has detrimental (even tragic) consequences both socially and mentally for some.

Words matter as they shape our understanding. Words matter as they have promises embedded within them, words can transport us and be sources of magic. But words can also conceal and be used as code for other things. So, when we speak about 'heavy' vs 'light' a particular dynamic is set in stall in my mind. We come to see 'heavy' as 'bad' perhaps because it feels onerous, burdensome, and troublesome even; it's the world of stuff and possessions in other words. In contrast, 'light' is the stuff of clouds, its ethereal, other-worldly, optimistic even. One of Bauman's favourite authors I believe was Milan Kundera, and he wrote of this dynamic too in his treasured book, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (2020, orig. 1984), so here lightness conjures up not a positive state but one of unbearableness. Lightness is also the land of our digital and AI dreams which are aspirational and 'liberatory'. Here, too, an opportunity and promise are offered, rather than pain, suffering, or ambivalence. This is the trick of marketing perhaps to present itself as the 'the

spectacular failures of brands which had promised so much to consumers'.² We must also remind ourselves of why Bauman spoke of 'liquid times' (2006) subtitled most importantly as 'living in an age of uncertainty'. In an interview with Chris Rojek (2004), Bauman explained his preference for the metaphor of 'liquidity': 'one trait all liquids share: the feebleness, weakness, brevity and frailty of bonds and thus inability to keep shape for long' (2004, p. 301). So here he makes explicit that the reference is to the changing nature of social bonds in the face of unsurmountable forces (economic, political, technological, and social). Likewise, on a number of occasions Bauman employed Ralph Waldo Emerson's idea that 'speed is the salvation of those who skate on thin ice ... speed is the salvation of surfers' (2004, p. 301). Speed (or Fast culture) – commonly understood as convenience or getting ahead – we must also remind ourselves that it is the logic of capitalism and non-stop consumerism.

On affective terrains

To return to Belk's original work it is necessary to speak of the subtle binary which is hidden within this classic text. On a number of occasions, he mentions the 'unextended' self. Here, he suggests: 'material possessions forming parts of our extended selves seem to form an anchor for our identities that reduces our fear that these identities will somehow be washed away. We may speculate that the stronger the individual's unextended or core self, the less the need to acquire, save and care for a number of possessions forming part of the extended self' (1988, p. 159). Later, he suggests: 'Possessions help us manipulate our possibilities and present the self in a way that garners feedback from others who are reluctant to respond to the unextended self' (1988, p. 159). To me it feels strange that the story of 'we are our possessions' became the dominant takeaway from this classic paper, when in fact perhaps the focus might equally have been upon the value of the unextended life and its attendant forms of understanding and embodied conduct (see also Roster, 2014 on the 'art of letting go', and Dobscha & Ozanne, 2001 on the 'mutual self' who aspires to consume less and the shift to a biocircular economy guided by EARTH principles (Marshall et al., 2023).

To explore further this notion of the unextended life, it's necessary to return to the work of Erich Fromm who in the *Art of Loving* (1957/1995) suggests:

The experience of separateness arouses anxiety; it is, indeed, the source of all anxiety. Being separate means, being cut off, without any capacity to use my human powers. Hence to be separate means to be helpless, unable to grasp the world – things and people – actively; it means that the world can invade me without my ability to react. (1957/1995, p. 7)

Perhaps, this explains why we should take a notion of the extended self so seriously as it combats existential doubt, the ontological insecurity of the unextended life. For, as Adorno when writing in the 1970s of the culture industry reconsidered, suggested: 'People are not only, as the saying goes, falling for the swindle; if it guarantees them even the most fleeting gratification, they desire a deception which is nonetheless transparent to them. They force their eyes shut and voice approval, in a kind of self-loathing, for what is meted out to them, knowing fully the purpose for which it is manufactured. Without admitting it, they sense that their lives would be completely intolerable as soon as they no longer clung to satisfactions which are none at all' (1975, p. 16). Here, our

pursuit and desire for such ‘fleeting gratification[s]’ of consumption reveals a persuasive industrial logic, almost addictive, captivating and compulsive, that to be without possessions is to live in a land of anxiety cut adrift from social relations. Here, the ‘work’ of possessions (objects) aligns with a powerful market logic of building, fostering, and sustaining social relationships not only with others but also with ourselves.

Such a dynamic force is hard to break, hard to untether and hard to break such a chain of influence, especially in a land of digital technology in which the desire to consume is just a screen and swipe away. There’s also industry at work here, powerful institutional, political, and commercial forces are at play that command us and ‘enrol’ (Giesler & Thompson, 2016) us into a world of work and consumption (see also Tadjewski, 2018 on biopolitics and the ‘biopolitical management of consumers’).

If the pandemic taught us anything, it is that there is always a politics to consumer and government choices – that choices are not innocent, they have consequences and that they can be linked to ways of thinking and behaving and that they reveal the ideological tensions at work. Rather than unity expect diversity and divergence, rather than accord expect discord, rather than satisfaction expect dissatisfaction and the workings of a paradoxical logic (Fromm, 1957/1995, p. 58) in how people respond to the same circumstances (events/socio-economic environment/conjuncture): ‘To sum it all up: culture, as it tends to be seen now, is as much an agent of disorder as it is a tool of order’ (Bauman, 1973/1999, p. xx). Or, as Smail (2005) suggests:

The only thing that people are called upon to do to realise their dreams is to consume, and psychology has been fundamental to the creation of the perfect consumer. The latter is an individual detached from every kind of social and environmental context other than that of greedy competition for goods and services with other individuals, existing otherwise in a fantasy world where there is in theory no limit to the achievement of gratification. (p. ii)

Dreaming, fantasy, and consumption are closely aligned here; and the fundamental work of marketing and consumer research armed with psychological and even cultural (CCT) and managerial insight is that of sustaining the powerful illusions built around where happiness lies and for keeping us in the ‘mood to buy’ (Davies, 2016, Chapter 3). Here, as Craig tells us ‘the self as a “light” ontological entity distributed across a network of actants’ (Thompson, 2024, p. 562) becomes the order of the day. To me, this speaks of how ‘branding being’ (Hewer & Brownlie, 2013), but also the powerful mythology of the entrepreneurial self of contemporary capitalism comes to the fore (see also Hewer et al., 2013).

To speak of the affective terrain of contemporary consumption we must admit that not only are possessions (and decisions) useful yet problematic but also that emotions matter and become the stuff of marketing and consumer research. To do so, it’s necessary to turn to the work of Ahmed who asks ‘How do emotions work to align some subjects with some others and against others? How do emotions move between bodies?’ (Ahmed, 2004, p. 117). Such questions appear important and worthy of further consideration within consumer research if we are to move to a position where emotions are handled in both more serious and subtle nuanced ways to capture the ways they work on us through consumption and production. We must also recognise how much the qualities and possibilities of emotion become useful in a cost-of-living crisis in which the selling of

stuff becomes problematic as low footfall and low consumer confidence speak volumes of the volatile contemporary state of consumption.

The counterpoint to a notion of hope (see Hewer, 2022) is perhaps consumer fear and its attendant 'negative' consequences for a feeling of aliveness where distress, injustice and suffering come to the fore. The work of Davies (2018) points to the paradoxical relation we sometimes have with fear. Using the work of Freud and his seminal essay 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', Davies suggests:

Similarly, adults are often drawn towards theatre or artworks that re-enact something painful for them. Freud recognised how his own patients' unconscious minds were constantly returning them to past traumas, via dreams and utterances during analysis. He surmised from these examples that people have a 'compulsion to repeat' painful experiences, so they can switch from the status of passive victims to that of active instigators. Repetition of painful experiences allows us to attain control over them, which can often be more appealing than pleasure. (2018, p. 110)

The story of how consumer fear, escape and distress rather than pleasure, choice and consumer desire is imbricated within consumption and the labour marketing and consumer research which makes use of fear as a strategic tactic to 'enrol' consumers I leave to another day. For now, I leave you with the thought that the liquid spirit and longing for marketplace affect and even marketplace hope feels like the on-trend antidote to the fraught times we inhabit. These are the worlds of Spotify and TikTok where vibes matter most. Apologies for my use of extended quotes in this piece, they are my academic Achilles heel. I employ them to resurrect the dead, to take me (and readers) to the words and thoughts of those long gone but who struggled and foregrounded the need to 'understand' (Simmel, 1964) our contemporary predicament: For, as Vance Packard writing in the late 1950s stated on the successful manipulation of 'our guilt feelings, fears, anxieties, hostilities, loneliness, feelings, inner tensions' (1960, p. 54) which perhaps points towards a psychotic and delusional self within a world of consumption in my mind and perhaps a 'new' focus for consumer research, an ABC if you like of critical keywords to rethink the canon of this emergent field: Affect, breakdown and contradiction. The signs are bright.

Notes

1. In this text Bauman (1999) offers some enlightening interpretations of *Culture as Praxis*: 'Culture is, therefore, the natural enemy of alienation. It constantly questions the self-appointed wisdom, serenity and authority of the Real' (1999, p. 139); Or: 'Culture, which is synonymous with the specifically human existence, is a daring dash for freedom from necessity and freedom to create. It is a blunt refusal to the offer of a secure animal life. It is – to paraphrase Santayana – a knife with its sharp edge pressed continuously against the future' (1999, p. 136). Such a focus surely takes us beyond our disciplinary focus on consumer decision-making and the purchasing moment, or so I hope and pray!
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p07012sf>

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Paul Hewer is a critical consumer researcher who calls Scotland home. He works at the University of Strathclyde and would like to dedicate this piece to his mum and dad: Mrs Sandra and Mr Patrick Deyiwe, Rest in peace Mum.

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